

Counties and Councils of Government

This section is targeted to units or coalitions of government that are between the municipality and the region in terms of size. These include very different types of organizations or alliances, but they operate on similar geographic scales. They include:

County governments and other governments organized at the county level.

Councils of Government (COGs), or voluntary associations of municipalities and some special purpose local government units.

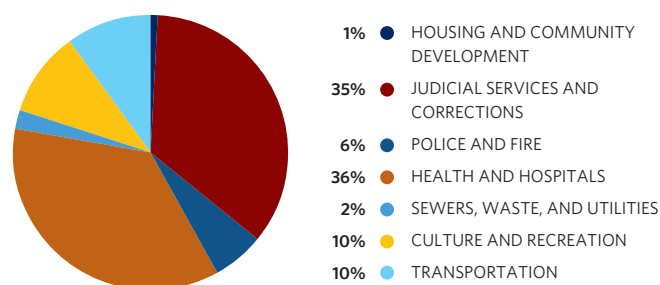
“Collaborations,” or coalitions of governments, nonprofits, and private sector entities organized to serve specific goals such as transportation planning, affordable housing, and others; these are often organized through counties or COGs.

How County and COG Decisions Affect Plan Implementation

One of the region's great strengths is its commitment to highly local governance, where a resident's elected leaders may live just a few doors down and village proceedings are invested with a real sense of shared purpose. Yet there are many issues that go beyond individual communities, and local leaders often join or form voluntary associations to grapple with larger matters or seek mutual benefit.

Counties are a multi-faceted level of government. They have responsibilities for planning and regulating land use in unincorporated areas, and they also provide services in health, criminal justice, stormwater management, economic development, property records and tax assessment, and transportation. Criminal justice and health account for more than 70 percent of county expenditures, with transportation adding another 10 percent (see **Figure 69**), according to data from 2006. Note that Cook County operates a hospital system, while the collar counties do not, which affects the share of expenditures devoted to health and hospitals. As a county urbanizes and more land becomes incorporated, its responsibility for regulating land use decreases, while its responsibilities in other areas increase. Thus there are great variations across the region in terms of the effort put into county land use planning; regardless of this, all counties can play a role in helping to translate the regional principles of GO TO 2040 into strategies that can be successfully implemented locally. A number of other specific-purpose groups are organized at the county level, although they are separate institutions or units of government; most relevant for this section are the forest preserve and conservation districts.

Figure 69. County expenditures, 2006



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006

COGs are membership organizations of local governments, and help to convene municipal leaders. COGs provide forums for municipalities to discuss common issues, organize responses to regional or state initiatives, share best practices and local experience, organize purchasing pools, and so forth. A best practice — in housing, urban design, energy efficiency programs, stormwater management — may be novel, but a municipality next door may have adopted it with great success. COGs can help to make this communication happen. COGs also help create the networking environment in which local governments can find opportunities to partner for mutual benefit, as is necessary to implement a number of strategies in GO TO 2040. Some COGs also have responsibility for transportation programming decisions, which are an important element of plan implementation (in other cases, these responsibilities rest with Councils of Mayors housed at the county level).

The term “collaborations” is used somewhat loosely to describe multi-jurisdictional cooperative efforts of various types along a spectrum of formality. These can be used to address common issues, such as transportation, housing, or economic development, which cross jurisdictional borders but are not fully “regional” in scale. Collaborations can address many of the priorities of GO TO 2040, such as improving transit service, planning for affordable housing needs, or attracting economic growth to disadvantaged communities. Collaborative groups are often sponsored in part by counties or by COGs, and also by other organizations. Many of the recommendations in GO TO 2040 involve improving coordination between different units of government, and collaborative planning and implementation is an important part of this.

Livable Communities

As conveners of municipalities, COGs have a role in assisting with the implementation of livable communities, which include land use and housing, resource conservation, open space, and local food. Counties are also central to addressing livability because they have land use regulatory authority in unincorporated areas as well as the ability to convene and coordinate municipal planning.

Land Use and Housing

Counties have a key role in the promotion of livability through their land use planning responsibilities. Many counties have regional planning commissions that provide guidance on long-range planning activities. With involvement from these groups, counties can play a key role in bridging the regional ideas and principles in GO TO 2040 with their implementation at the local level. In many parts of the region, counties also provide valuable technical assistance to municipalities and help to negotiate boundary and joint land use agreements.



The 2002 Will County Land Resource Management Plan established a policy that the majority of new urban and suburban development should occur within municipalities, saying further that “the most desirable form of county development is a compact one that directs development into and around existing communities and service areas.” For its own role, that plan indicated that the county should seek to balance the efficient use of land with compatibility with nearby neighborhoods. Image courtesy of Will County

GO TO 2040 recommends that most household and employment growth occur within existing municipal boundaries, and that it should be relatively denser than growth has been in recent years. For those counties with significant nonurban land, it will be important to continue to produce comprehensive plans (also called “land resource management plans”) whose goals include strengthening both urban and rural areas. To support GO TO 2040’s interest in reinvestment in existing communities, county plans can focus development onto land within existing municipal boundaries. County plans of this type also frequently address other issues related to livability, such as historic preservation.

Counties also have responsibility for zoning and plat review in unincorporated areas. In such cases, it is crucial for county boards to exercise the leadership needed to make zoning decisions consistent with their land resource management plans, which may include limiting the approval of developments in unincorporated areas. In areas where unincorporated development is preferred, however, it is important to use low-impact or conservation design. Conservation design entails preserving a significant portion of the natural features on a development site by using flexible lot sizes and shapes as well as using advanced stormwater best management practices.

GO TO 2040 calls attention to the importance of collaborations between communities for transportation, housing, economic development, and other issues. These can often allow participating jurisdictions to access more funding and derive more benefit for themselves than they could by going it alone. Counties and COGs can often act as the sponsors or facilitators of these efforts. Collaborations can also encompass both the public and private sectors. The many chambers of commerce and development corporations in the region are organized to serve areas ranging from commercial districts to cities, in many cases relying on a public-private model to maximize their effectiveness.

Resource Conservation

GO TO 2040 recommends actions that the region’s local governments, including both counties and municipalities, can take to conserve water and energy and to manage stormwater.

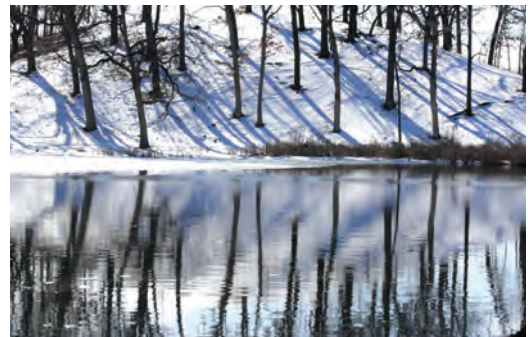
County comprehensive plans and programs can address water supply and demand management. This has become an increasingly important issue because groundwater levels in aquifers serving outlying counties have been declining and in some cases are showing higher concentrations of chemicals like barium and radium. CMAP’s *Water 2050* report recommends that county governments protect groundwater by taking aquifer recharge areas into account in comprehensive planning, and developing ordinances to regulate land use in recharge areas, among other actions. Although they do not often operate water utilities, counties can administer or help implement many water conservation best management practices, such as appliance and water fixture rebates or providing a conservation coordinator.



McHenry County instituted conservation design requirements in its subdivision code that go into effect when there are important natural resources on a development site. Image courtesy of Flickr user Thomas Merton



The South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association (SSMMA) is an intergovernmental agency providing assistance to 42 municipalities in Cook and Will counties. SSMMA’s services are diverse, ranging from assistance with open space planning to joint purchasing agreements to legislative advocacy to operating a bond bank for municipal infrastructure projects. From CMAP Library



McHenry County Water Resources, along with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, developed a map of Sensitive Aquifer Recharge Areas (SARAs) and has been working to integrate it into comprehensive plan recommendations. While its methodology is oriented toward the sand and gravel aquifers of the county, a similar method could be used elsewhere. Image courtesy of Flickr user Kelly Dobbins

COGs also have an important role in water supply planning and management. Through participation in *Water 2050*, both counties and COGs have had an integral role in shaping the goals and policies that will guide water supply and demand management within the region in the upcoming decades. They also play an important role in implementation, as they provide a forum in which members can learn more about water conservation measures within the ambit of municipal utilities. GO TO 2040 specifically recommends examining the consolidation of water supply and wastewater treatment services to increase efficiencies; counties and COGs can take an active role in beginning these discussions.

Counties have responsibility for stormwater permitting in unincorporated areas, and through the unique countywide committee system in northeastern Illinois, minimum performance standards for stormwater are also set at the county level. Standards for drainage, detention, and other concerns help protect against flooding and damage to water resources. Stormwater management programs have been successful, but could be strengthened by use of stormwater best management practices, especially green infrastructure, to promote infiltration. Another concern is the maintenance of stormwater infrastructure; counties can help address this by investigating the use of maintenance fees.

Counties also have an important role in solid waste management. All Illinois counties are required by the state to develop and implement twenty-year solid waste management plans. Counties can help to encourage recycling and composting waste, as well as continuing to explore alternatives to landfills.

Open Space

GO TO 2040 includes a number of direct recommendations to forest preserve districts and conservation districts, which are organized at the county level but are separate units of government. Forest preserve and conservation districts operate in each county in northeastern Illinois and play a major role in providing regional open lands. In many ways, they have been tremendously successful. Their model is to acquire undeveloped land using proceeds from the sale of bonds, the debt service ultimately being covered by property taxes on the more developed land in the county. It is important for forest preserves and conservation districts to consider the long-term management of the lands they protect, in particular to emphasize ecosystem restoration of their holdings wherever possible. GO TO 2040 recommends specifically that forest preserve and conservation districts participate in regional efforts to prioritize land protection and ecosystem restoration activities, and then to reflect these priorities in their actual work. Counties can also play a significant role in open space preservation by addressing open space needs in their comprehensive plans and land use regulations.

Furthermore, local governments fall within natural boundaries as well as political or administrative boundaries, such as when the land within several political divisions all drains to one body of water (i.e., is within one watershed). Watershed planning is a process often used to bring leaders from these jurisdictions together to help solve problems in a waterway, such as flooding or poor water quality, to which they contribute or which affect them in some way.



Among other stormwater best management practices, the Lake County Central Permit Facility uses native plant bioswales. These shallow excavated swales with deep-rooted native plants are designed to collect, absorb, and filter stormwater runoff and pollutants that collect on the parking lot pavement from automobiles. County government can be a leader in using stormwater best management practices. Photo and description courtesy of Lake County.



On November 4, 2008, voters in Lake County approved a \$185 million referendum with 66 percent of the vote for the Lake County Forest Preserves to acquire and improve land to protect wildlife habitats, conduct ecosystem restoration, and to provide flood control and recreation. Certain properties that the Forest Preserves had been targeting for years were in danger of being sold for other purposes. Of the funds, \$148 million will be used for land acquisition purposes. It is estimated the referendum funds may establish 3,000 acres of preserves. Image courtesy of Flickr user Bob Callebert

Local Food

GO TO 2040 recommends the preservation of agricultural land and an increase in production of local food. Across the region, counties have taken the lead in the implementation of farmland preservation. This can be encouraged by making it a focus of comprehensive planning, which most counties do, but farmland preservation is most successful when it has a stable funding program. Counties and nearby forest preserves or conservation districts should also work together to support agriculture as part of preserved open space.

Other Actions That Support Livability

Counties are largely responsible for public health, and can use this expertise to link the features of livable communities with positive health outcomes. Besides this role, counties can play a significant part in coordinating human service programs, which are often carried out by a variety of organizations and different levels of government. An important way to do so is by participating in a 211 system (modeled on the 911 system) that provides callers with information and referrals about human services and related community information. Counties typically distribute Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding, coordinate energy assistance programs, and have a number of other responsibilities. The central role of the counties in providing human services gives them the ability to help convene service providers and funders to ensure that needs are being addressed appropriately.



A strong and successful farmland preservation program in the region is that of Kane County, which has a purchase of development rights program funded through taxes on casino receipts. The program is used to ensure that farmland will not be converted to another use by a future owner. Image courtesy of Flickr user Cassandra Pozulp



The DuPage Funders' Collaborative is a group of public and private organizations using their combined strength to achieve a wider understanding of health and human service needs of the population served and the providers; to promote efficiency and effectiveness; and to seek improved and sustainable funding for human services. Photo courtesy of iStockphoto.com

Human Capital

The GO TO 2040 plan seeks to improve the region’s economic prosperity and includes high-priority recommendations in the areas of education and workforce development and economic innovation. It also generally supports efforts by entities within the region to improve its overall business environment.

All seven counties undertake economic development activities, although the approach and the level of resources vary considerably between them. Counties are uniquely positioned to do the kind of economic development recommended by GO TO 2040 that yields broad economic benefits — job creation, productivity increases, income growth — over narrower fiscal benefits that accrue to only one jurisdiction or that merely move economic activity from one location to another. Among the general economic development services the counties can provide are information that municipalities and the private sector can use to support business development. They can also encourage transportation projects that support businesses.

Education and Workforce Development

GO TO 2040 emphasizes the importance of community colleges and Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), which are typically organized at the county level. Counties can play a role by facilitating collaborations between community colleges and workforce investment boards as there is untapped potential within the community college system to support workforce development and to fill gaps between worker skills and employer needs, and by linking their economic development work to these institutions. Supporting the growth of green jobs is an area where such collaborations are particularly relevant.



The Will County Center for Economic Development (CED) provides a comprehensive, forward-looking picture of business conditions in Will County. It serves members and potential investors with workshops and tours of economic assets in the county. Will County CED also works with communities and the County to provide business incentives. Image courtesy of Will County Center for Economic Development



The McHenry County College recently began offering several career training programs dedicated to “green collar” jobs. This would complement an initiative to promote energy efficiency retrofits in buildings and promote renewable energy production in the county, as it would also help support the market for community college graduates’ skills. Image courtesy of Flickr user David Hallberg

Efficient Governance

The GO TO 2040 plan also includes recommendations that relate to governance in the areas of tax policy, access to information, and coordinated investment.

Tax Policy

GO TO 2040 emphasizes the importance of efficient, predictable, and transparent state and local tax policies that do not distort land use decisions or stifle economic activity. While tax policy issues largely focus on the state and local municipal governments, counties play an important role in terms of property assessment, which helps determine equalized assessed values and tax rates by local jurisdiction. Counties can help by making their assessment systems as predictable and transparent as possible for the taxpayer, and not placing undue tax burdens upon either residential or commercial property owners and renters, which can alter location decisions and thus distort economic activity.

Access to Information

GO TO 2040 recommends the increased sharing of data among government agencies, and between government and the public. Making federal, state, regional, county, and other data available will reduce the time needed to do time-consuming research by staff of other government agencies. There is also a significant role for counties in making administrative data, such as building permits, publicly available — which in turn reduces the need for research by other government agencies. Sharing data with the general public also improves transparency and fulfills the ever-increasing expectations of the public concerning the availability of information.

Coordinated Investments

GO TO 2040 recommends investigating the coordination of services, or in some cases consolidation, of units of local governments (including townships, park districts, library districts, and many other types). In many cases services are matched well to the level of service residents want, but in other cases they are duplicated in overlapping or neighboring districts and merely cause confusion for residents. The recession has stimulated greater belt-tightening among local governments, and consolidation can be a way to gain cost efficiencies. Counties and COGs can have a key role in bringing local governments together and facilitating discussions on service coordination and consolidation opportunities.

Regional Mobility

Counties and COGs also play a role in supporting the high-priority recommendations related to regional mobility, particularly those related to transportation finance and public transit.

Transportation Finance

GO TO 2040 emphasizes the importance of making better and more efficient transportation decisions, as well as finding additional revenue to support transportation. As owners of roadways and other transportation infrastructure, counties can help to support GO TO 2040 by prioritizing maintenance and modernization in their investment decisions, and pursuing major infrastructure expansions only on a limited basis.

Councils of Mayors are groups of municipalities which select projects to be funded by the Surface Transportation Program (STP), a federal program. These groups are convened and staffed by either counties or COGs. STP funds can be used to improve arterial and collector streets or to implement transportation control measures, like bicycle facilities, commuter parking lots for suburban transit, or similar strategies. Each Council receives individual funding and determines its own methodology for selecting projects, subject to federal guidelines. Local councils have broad discretion in how they select projects, and can support GO TO 2040 by allocating funding to projects that help to implement the plan.

Public Transit

GO TO 2040 also highlights the importance of local support to make transit work. Counties can support transit through land use planning, small-scale infrastructure investment, and contributing funding, and both counties and COGs can also work with transit agencies to plan for transit improvement or expansion in their areas. In the case of investments in new or expanded transit service, collaboration is crucial to address density and design throughout a corridor even though these can vary depending on the jurisdiction with land use control.

Certain kinds of urban design improvements can be effective at a larger scale as a collaboration between local governments which could be facilitated by a county or COG. Streetscaping and access management along major arterials is one of these. As a major streetscape overhaul would address issues of appearance and functionality along the corridor, benefits gained by improvements in one jurisdiction could be lost by disregarding improvements needed across a jurisdictional boundary.



Kane County is working in partnership with a group of municipalities to improve transit accessibility along Randall Road for Pace Route 529. The existing corridor lacks sufficient access for pedestrians and disabled persons, while many of the buildings along the corridor have large setbacks with extensive parking, limited sidewalks, and no waiting areas. The study is intended to address these design issues across the five municipalities in the corridor (Aurora, North Aurora, Batavia, Geneva, and St. Charles). Image courtesy of Flickr user geonerd



The DuPage Mayors and Managers Conference (DMMC) stands out as an example of a COG whose project selection process for STP funding is criteria-based and clearly prioritized. Projects funded under this program are evaluated on the basis of cost-effectiveness, congestion reduction potential, readiness, innovativeness, funding leverage, and the size of the area to which benefits accrue. Image courtesy of DMMC website

In transportation, collaboration between units of government is often shaped by a major travel corridor. For example, transportation management associations (TMAs) are generally organized at the corridor level, frequently by employers who wish to encourage commute trip reduction. Commute trip reduction is a major part of transportation demand management (TDM), which would be more difficult without the assistance of a TMA. They can have positive impacts on travel behavior; comparable areas without active TMAs generally have considerably lower alternative mode shares. As there are only three active TMAs in the region, there are ample opportunities to establish more, and counties and COGs can take an active role in this.

Other Actions That Support Regional Mobility

Counties have jurisdiction over more than 2,000 miles of highway in the region, giving them an important role in congestion management as well as supporting alternative transportation modes. An important low-capital means of reducing congestion is to improve operations by employing intelligent transportation systems (ITS). Another important area for counties to emphasize is access management. Counties can manage the spacing of driveways, number of curb cuts, median openings and so forth along arterials and collectors they manage to improve traffic flow.

Research in recent years has made it clear that low-density patterns of development and increased automobile dependence are associated with lack of physical activity and poor public health outcomes. As counties are front-line providers of public health services across the region, they have a special interest in the connection between health outcomes and the physical landscape as shaped by development decisions.

In fact, counties have begun to explore that relationship in order to promote fitness for residents as part of their planning efforts as well as project implementation. County planning can establish land use and transportation policies that help increase physical activity. Related to their role in protecting public health by promoting active lifestyles, counties may also encourage a “complete streets” approach to roadway design, making sure that needs of pedestrians and bicyclists are accommodated. Counties also can take a leadership role in providing both on-street and off-street bicycle facilities and encouraging connections between municipal bicycle systems.



The TMA of Lake Cook has focused corporate leadership on providing alternative travel options for the TMA’s member employers, including expanded city-to-suburb and suburb-to-suburb commuter rail and a national-model “Shuttle Bug” service from commuter rail stations to employment sites. The shuttle service grew from 110 daily trips when it began in 1996 to 1,300 daily trips today. From CMAP Library



Lake County’s “Program for Arterial Signal Synchronization and Travel Guidance” (PASSAGE) gives motorists real-time information about traffic bottlenecks via electronic signs or an AM radio station. Based on the same information collected by cameras and traffic sensors, operators can also adjust traffic signal timing to reduce congestion buildup. This still-expanding ITS system is a model for other counties. Image courtesy of Lake County



Through the Communities Putting Prevention to Work program, Suburban Cook County is taking steps to reduce obesity — a mounting epidemic — by promoting policy changes to help residents lead healthy, active lifestyles. These include increasing nutritional options, decreasing opportunities for excess caloric intake from unhealthy foods and beverages, and increasing the availability of safe places to be physically active. Image courtesy of Jane Healy